Performances of Irishness at New York's Gaelic Park

By Sara Brady, Ph.D.

Photo: *Exterior view of entrance to Gaelic Park in May, 2003. Courtesy of Sara Brady.*

Gaelic Park is nestled in the northwest corner of the Bronx and has been home to the New York Gaelic Athletic Association (NYGAA) since 1928. More than just a stadium for hurling, camogie, and Gaelic football, the park has been a cultural center for the city's Irish immigrant population. The importance of Gaelic Park to that community is hard to overestimate, as exhibited in this recent tribute appearing on the cover of the annual NYGAA dinner dance program:

> *"For all who crossed the Atlantic*
> *Would soon learn of this landmark*
> *On a New York Sunday afternoon*
> *All roads led to Gaelic Park."*
> —in Levins et. al., 2004:n.p.

The park has been called a mecca, a haven, and a magnet for Irish immigrants.[1] It is here, in this performance space, that more than one version of Irishness—unlike those consumed in mainstream American culture—thrive. Inside its gates, Irishness has, for decades, been created, discarded, and re-created through performances that construct resilience and resistance. For immigrants new and old, the park offers the chance to build resilience: to lose a little of the blandness that whiteness in the United States brings, and to re-gain the peculiarity of ethnicity. Alternatively, it is a space in which a resistance (even if temporary) to both assimilating to the host culture (America) and yielding to the home culture (Ireland) emerges. Gaelic Park instead offers an autonomous culture and sense of place.[2]

Few places in New York rival Gaelic Park, where the specific function of sport boosts a bigger happening characterized by leisure, spectatorship, and social interaction particular to an ethnic group. Most sports associated with immigrant populations—cricket, rugby, soccer, and kabbadi—are

Sara Brady received her doctoral degree from New York University, where she completed her dissertation on Irish sport and culture at New York's Gaelic Park. Her writing has appeared in TDR: The Drama Review *and in* American Theatre *magazine. She is a founding member of* GRIAN *and editor of* Foilsiú, *an interdisciplinary journal of Irish studies published by* GRIAN and Glucksman Ireland House, NYU. *She teaches at Montclair State University in New Jersey.*

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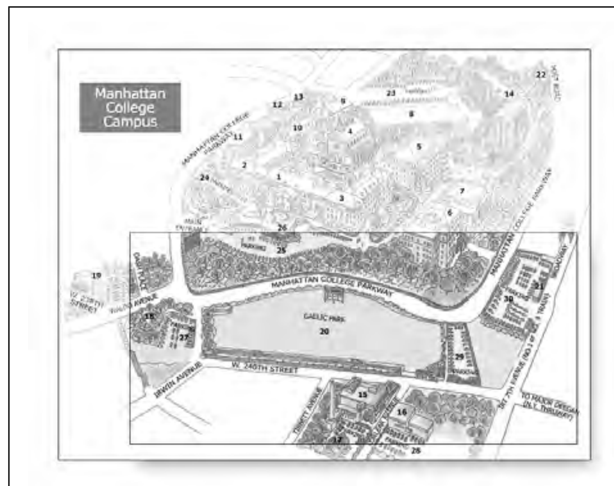

Illustrations: (above) *Campus map of Manhattan College showing area of Gaelic Park. Courtesy of Manhattan College.* (right) *Site of the first meeting (1914) of the New York Gaelic Athletic Association, which was held in Billy Snow's Hall at Broadway and 119th Street in Manhattan. P.J. Grimes, who attended that meeting, points out the Hall. Photo is from program for Seventy-fifth Anniversary banquet held in 1989. Courtesy of New York Gaelic Athletic Association.*

most often played in public parks. Outside New York, Gaelic games are played in spaces similar to Gaelic Park, such as its namesake in Chicago, Boston's Irish Cultural Center, and London's Emerald Grounds. Although it might resemble village grounds found throughout Ireland, Gaelic Park gathers many more than just one local team in one place.[3] Although a far cry from the state-of-the-art Croke Park in Dublin, it maintains a place in the Irish imagination, as noted by New York team selector Leslie McGettigan before a match against Mayo:

> *"It's astonishing the number of calls we've had from people who may have played at some stage, or knew the lads, or just spent time around Gaelic Park."*
>
> —Duggan 1999:16

Star GAA players visited often and brought home stories, especially during the long reign of John "Kerry" O'Donnell, who held the Gaelic Park lease from 1945 through 1990.

In fact the park has always been owned outright by the City of New York. Through the City's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), various parties—including NYGAA administrators, private individuals, and (most recently) Manhattan College—have contracted the space. The NYGAA currently sublets from the College. Four distinct borders transform this public arena into a semi-private space—Broadway on the east, an above-ground subway track on the north, 240th Street on the south, and a wooded hill on the west. Inside these barriers, Gaelic Park is essentially cut off from the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic realities of the surrounding urban environment. Whether by intention or coincidence, these borders have insured that Gaelic Park culture continues to be particular to the Irish, just as the culture of Gaelic games has insured that these sports remain tied closely to Ireland.[4] Exclusion creates a club-like atmosphere where performances take place in front of an audience in-the-know. Even the city cannot always retain control, a phenomenon exemplified most recently by smokers defiantly lighting up in the bar area.[5] At other times, the park welcomes the city, like when the mayor visits or the police and fire departments play their annual Gaelic football game.

Whether the event is a Sunday NYGAA game, or a FDNY vs. NYPD charity match, "There's just something about Gaelic Park," as one interviewee, Timothy,[6] told me. He had worked at the park and was convinced of its special qualities, which he proved to me with an example. He explained that even if a non-Irish group books the space from Manhattan College, "In some way, shape, or form, their function takes sort of an Irish twist to it, no matter what they do. It's unbelievable." One recurring example includes the Sweet Sixteen parties held at the park by Latino families. "At Gaelic Park, they're all Irish" he explained (9/11/03). The isolated atmosphere at Gaelic Park seems to almost dictate the behavior of anyone who enters, no mat-

ter what is going on inside, as if all the repeat performances of Irishness over the years has left only one possibility for the *craic*.

On a typical Sunday past or present, however, the *craic* is serious business. Gaelic Park has not only been the place men and women in equal numbers could go in New York to watch Gaelic games, see friends, have a hot dinner (past) or a bad hamburger (present), consume major amounts of bottled beer, listen and dance to live music, be cajoled into buying an overpriced fundraiser ticket, hear the gossip, and, sometimes, get lucky; but it has also been the place to go to secure accommodation and a job upon arrival in the States. Today Gaelic Park is simultaneously adored and abhorred. I've heard it called a dump as often as I've heard it called a palace. As I observed and interviewed participants there, I asked about what people get by going to Gaelic Park. The answer involved something transformative. Something happens to park visitors. What they get is some Irishness.[7] People feel reassured, reaffirmed, newly Irish, bathed in identity—real.

Despite the fabricated authenticity of Gaelic games as revived during the late nineteenth-century project of nationalism, they maintain incredible popularity. They are synonymous with Irish culture and are perceived by many as a receptacle of Irish identity. As one interviewee stated, "With the sport, you got to be in touch with this incredibly rich history of sport—hurling is one of the world's oldest games,

Photos: (left) *Picture from 1964 reproduced in program for New York vs. Mayo game held in May, 2004. Courtesy of New York Gaelic Athletic Association.* (below) *Field of play at Gaelic Park, looking northward, in May, 2004. Courtesy of Billy Urbanawiz.*

Photos:
(above) *Post-game revelry outside Gaelic Park bar during Spring 2003. Courtesy of Sara Brady.* (opposite page, top) *Teams and hurling action between New York and Down during May 2004. Photos courtesy of Ray Lennon/ NYGaelicPhoto.com.* (opposite page, below) *Spectators watch football contest between Leitrim and New York, May 2003. Courtesy of Damien Eagers/ SPORTSFILE *EDI*.*

and you can play it." —Tony (6/10/03). Whether a participant or spectator, one can enter Gaelic Park and through the performance of the Gaelic games come out a little more Irish.

The idea that one might change from a park visit evokes Richard Schechner's idea of "transformation of consciousness." He explains:

> *"Either permanently…or temporarily… performers—and sometimes spectators too—are changed by the activity of performing."*
>
> —Schechner 1985:4

The spectator's experience may vary from Brechtian distance to participating in the performance (10). Each continuum defined by Schechner helps to describe what occurs at Gaelic Park, from the relatively passive observer who comes to enjoy one of the day's several games and goes straight home, to the player/spectator who arrives with hurling gear and watches a camogie match and a Gaelic football match before "togging out" to play in the final hurling match of the day, and later retreating to the bar to celebrate a win.

Whether participants or spectators, Gaelic Park enthusiasts also represent change themselves as members of the various waves of Irish immigration to New York since the late 1800s. Irish who migrated from roughly 1880 through the 1920s supported early Gaelic games in the city and the eventual founding of the NYGAA in 1914. During that period games were played at Celtic Park in Long Island City. In 1928 Innisfail Park, as the stadium was then called, made its debut. After a stint as Maccabi Stadium when a soccer club leased the space, John "Kerry" O'Donnell took over the lease, first calling the space "Croke Park," a move quickly shot down by the GAA's Central Council in Ireland. Around 1950 "Gaelic Park" opened its doors to the post–World War II generation of immigrants whose arrival led, in the 1950s and 1960s, to a heyday at the park. In 1965, however, federal immigration laws put an end to the era during which Irish immigrants were, according to A.P. Lobo and J.J. Salvo, "explicitly favoured" (1998:257). The changes essentially closed the previously open door with new requirements including sponsorship by an immediate family member. Not until the economic downturn of the 1980s did Irish begin to come to the city again and, in the face of minimal employment options at home, they repeated history. That population, which became known as the "New Irish," was an undocumented generation. They lived in the traditional Irish enclaves of the Bronx and Queens and worked under the table. They relied greatly on Gaelic Park to find jobs, apartments, friends, and romance, and their presence created another heyday during which the 1950s and 1980s generations converged. Members of these last two waves of immigrants and their families have constituted my participant pool, and it has been in our conversations that I have been able to combine what I have seen, heard, and read about with their perceptions of what happens at Gaelic Park.

Reassurance

During my interview with Patrick, who immigrated to New York in the 1980s, he explained

that at Gaelic Park there are "reminders of home." People go to there to be reassured of where they came from, to talk to others like them, see familiar faces, and watch a familiar game. (4/9/03). This kind of response suggests that a person leaves the park somewhat altered from when they entered. That transformation is often acquired with a little help. Drinking at Gaelic Park is a long-standing tradition and, for many, alcohol is a significant component of the day.

With reassurance comes relief, whether from the financial and cultural pressures associated with migration or the fear of losing one's identity in the city. Patrick suggested that after working all week, a new immigrant can go to the park on Sunday and have "that social experience that can get [him or her] through the week" because it is hard for a newcomer to make it in the city. Patrick emphasized the importance that playing the sport has for those who do it. It would be something valued, something that they would think about all week, something that they would think about the whole week after—it would be the high point of their week, and these weeks would be the high point of their lives in New York (4/9/03). Gareth and David, who immigrated in the early 1960s, emphasized that the Sunday ritual especially comforted those whose lives in Ireland were defined by Sunday mass and the Gaelic games that followed. "You could pay your $2 to get in," Gareth told me, "see a game, run down to Holy Cross church, get mass in, and come back up for the rest of the games. Then you'd buy your dinner for $1 and dance to the band for hours" (5/23/04). "All week you'd look forward to that," added David (5/23/04). "People go there for strength," said Patrick, "they go to Gaelic Park for the Sunday to survive, to have that one day where you hang out and touch people and culture. This gave you whatever you needed to face the new work week" (4/9/03). Resilience, it seems, comes with the group in a very basic social gathering.

MEETING THE GATEKEEPERS

The promise of the park traditionally begins in Ireland. Patrick (4/9/03) remembers leaving Shannon airport in 1987, when it was "…commonplace to say, 'meet Mick Murphy at Gaelic Park on Sunday,' to get a job, an apartment…." The idea was that in this big city there was a specific way to make a connection, someone that was fixed, this guy at the bar was a sure thing. Andy (8/4/03) described the situation in the 1980s:

> *"If you'd no qualifications and you came here and you were of the GAA you went to Gaelic Park to get a connection or you went to Gaelic Park because you knew the connection you had here was involved [in the GAA]."*

Others have clarified that many immigrants who joined the NYGAA never had previous involvement in their local clubs. In New York, especially for men, playing on a team could lead to a job through union or other contacts maintained by more established immigrants.

This scenario differs greatly for women, for whom enjoyment of the games comes from the social aspect of the clubs that make up the New York Ladies Gaelic Athletic Association, founded in 1991 (Katie 6/17/03; Brenda 7/16/03). For both sexes, the games (which are unremarkable in Ireland) become special in New York, making their appeal greater to the new arrival.

Photos: (this page and opposite) *Spectators at the Park, May 2003. Courtesy of Damien Eagers/ SPORTSFILE *EDI*.*

In any case, sorting out employment and basic social connections has always remained a first priority. Dennis, who grew up in both the U.S. and Ireland, explained that players often had to choose between hurling and football based on which game could better help secure work (1/17/04). Further, they would often not stay with their county teams, but follow the club with the best contacts:

> *"Whoever could get you work—that's who you played for."*

Athletes might also choose their better game, and by impressing an audience they could win jobs and apartments. John, who came from the midlands in the 1980s, first visited the States for the summer, and hurled so well for a Connaught team that he was invited back the next year. He eventually settled down in Yonkers (10/30/03). Work came from the unions and other mostly blue-collar industries that more established immigrants retained relationships with. Andy pointed out that even a trained carpenter might work as a laborer if the laborers' union was the stronger contact for a county team (8/4/03).

Mary Corcoran, in her sociological profile of the 1980s illegal generation, refers to the people who could help footballer or hurlers get jobs as

> *"…'gatekeepers' who control access to jobs in the construction industry and upon whom the immigrants are most dependent."*
> —Corcoran 1993:65

Sometimes Gaelic Park was the immigrant's first stop. Andy recounted that on the flight to New York in 1980:

> *"I saw a woman on the plane who was engaged to a friend of mine, and followed her literally out of Kennedy and when he* [my friend] *embraced her at Kennedy over her shoulder he saw me, and I said 'how are you Tommy,' and he says 'what the hell are you doin' here' and he was playing a game that day in Gaelic Park, and so within an hour of landing at Kennedy I was sitting in Gaelic Park, you know, and then, hung around the bars that night, I met a couple of people, 'where*

you staying,' 'I dunno,' (I had no place to stay), 'alright, c'mon, stay with us…what are you doing here,' 'out for the summer,' 'ok, are you working,' 'yeah, I'd like to work,' 'do you play football,' 'yeah,' 'come up training with us Tuesday night.'"

—8/4/03

John "Kerry" O'Donnell is quoted as saying:

"More people went astray…[in Gaelic Park]…than anywhere else. You would be surprised at the number of marriages."

—Bayor and Meagher 1996:418

What is initially achieved by visiting the park becomes over time something to replicate or remember in subsequent visits, and in this repetition may arise a change of roles, from the recipient of aid to becoming the source of support.

A Bit of Home in New York

Once a person becomes established in New York, how does the answer to "What happens at Gaelic Park?" change? If an immigrant secured a job through park contacts shortly after his arrival because he was a good hurler, or an apartment through a friend of a friend, what does Gaelic Park offer that person after thirty years in New York? Gerry, a first-generation Irish American, described the case of his father:

"My father emigrated in the 1950s and only went back to Ireland once, and then he decided never to go back. He wouldn't go with my son and I, when we went over for the All-Ireland, even though he goes to Gaelic Park every week."

—8/6/03

Gerry's observation about his father indicates that something happens at the park that is valued by this established immigrant. Whatever Gerry's father gains is something unique, as exhibited by the fact that even Ireland couldn't give him what Gaelic Park can. His experience is typical of a specific generation of Irish immigrants who came in the 1950s. They left an Ireland that differed completely from that exited by the 1980s generation (Almeida 2001:61). They therefore return to Ireland rarely, if at all, because their Ireland—the place they left—no longer exists. However, Gaelic Park still exists, and therefore serves as a place where the older generation of immigrants can gather and reacquaint themselves with their version of Irishness—the Gaelic Park version of Irishness—through Sunday visits. Since Ireland has changed beyond recognition, returning to home becomes null, so "returning" translates

into a weekly outing to the place they went to when they were new arrivals—a place not Ireland but not simply New York, a place closed off from the outside world, where Irish accents can be heard and Irish games will still be played. It is within this space that the seasoned Irish immigrant—who has essentially become "Irish American"—can, for an afternoon, escape from the sea of white American culture and claim a desired ethnicity. This trip is more effective than one to Ireland where the returned emigrant would be a "Yank."

Even the Gaelic Park of the past is, in a way, inaccessible because the games themselves have evolved. Where Ireland has produced players closer to ideal fitness, speed, and agility, perceptions of New York Irish games characterize them as slower, rougher, and fraught with discipline problems (Duggan 1999:16). Paul, an interviewee who immigrated in 1947, described the New York team that played Leitrim in May 2003 as "heavier, bulkier" than their competitors. The Leitrim players, he explained, were "like greyhounds," light, fit, and fast (5/8/03).

Gareth and David remember Gaelic games of the past as more spectacular, with long, high kick-outs and much less strategizing. In the face of such change and difference, an Irishness that tolerates greater imperfection operates for most of the season. When teams from Ireland visit, however, enthusiasts consume different kinds of Irishness, from the one based in authenticity for the immigrant crowd to the one based in the delight and pride of Irish visitors by witnessing the diaspora perform.

For the "auld boy," then, who sits on the top bleacher with his friends, change may have rendered both the Ireland and Gaelic Park of the past inaccessible, but it has not eliminated the importance of their ritual. The kind of Irishness that used to operate for a previous generation can be consumed in a re-enactment of the past while a new Irishness of the younger immigrants unfolds. While the older generation watches the young players on the field, they remember what they once performed themselves. The younger generation repeats, on the field, in the bleachers, and in the bar, what their forbearers enjoyed.

Photo: *Spectators at Gaelic Park, May 2003. Courtesy of Damien Eagers/* SPORTSFILE *EDI*.

Immigrant Players

This younger generation that performs at Gaelic Park is a diverse population whose characteristics can usefully inform the present analysis. First, there are weekenders, who are not really immigrants at all but tourists who come to play in New York for the weekend. Second, there are summer players who receive official permission from their home team to play with a New York team for a summer or a whole season. This group often includes young adults who receive the J-1 visa, which allows students to live and work in the United States for up to five months. Third, there are short-term immigrants, who "pass through here and go on to Australia or go on to Thailand or wherever they go"—these Irish are "doing the world" and New York is one stop on the way (Andy 8/4/03). They arrive either with J-1 visas or tourist visas (good for ninety days with no work permission) and work off the books—mostly in the construction industry, bars and restaurants, or domestic service. Fourth, there are those who are here indefinitely—they have no immediate plans to leave New York but do not see themselves staying forever. They are often out-of-status, meaning they have overstayed their tourist visas and are subject to three- or ten-year bans if they leave the States and attempt to re-enter. Finally, there are permanent immigrants, those who are settled in the States and, even if they plan to return or retire in Ireland, generally consider New York as home.

The weekender's trip is often seen as an honor or an award, as in the case of Kilkenny hurler and All-Ireland champion Henry Shefflin. The best players are invited much of the time; for other games, weekenders can be players that know someone on a New York team. They might not be All-Ireland stars, but their talents could lead to winning games. As visitors these players receive good treatment, indeed, better than regular New York players and sometimes better than their peers in Ireland. When they enter the field they are changed from ordinary GAA players to stars whose superior skills obviously exceed the rest of the team. After the game, "people crowd around the weekend guy" to give congratulations (Michael 5/21/03). These highly qualified players —especially hurlers—are perceived as the most Irish. As brief visitors they are the least affected by the dilution of migration or the tainted nature of New York Gaelic games. New York team selectors consider their cultural authenticity worth the costs to get them on the field.

Recent changes in immigration policy have forced weekend players into a precarious situation. Their tourist status no longer applies. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) requires that weekend players traveling as individuals arrange for entertainment visas, and immigration officials have refused entry to several players without visas at Dublin and Shannon airports. The fine line between paid athletes and volunteers further complicates the situation, as some players are actually compensated for their talent on the field while others only have their flights and accommodations taken care of. In contrast, weekenders who travel together as a county team to play New York have not experienced the same hassle (McDonald 2002:40; O'Flynn 2002:n.p.). They too enter the field like stars, because they are all real county players. They are considered the most talented of their county's village or parish teams. As a group representing a county, their celebrity status is a shared one. Their authenticity lies in their definition as a group, whether they are Mayo footballers or Down hurlers. They often receive the strongest support from those native to the county (Thomas 5/18/03), as demonstrated by the high attendance at Gaelic Park when Leitrim played New York in May 2003 and when Mayo played New York in May 2004. Nearly five-thousand spectators were present at each game, a number boosted by fans who flew from Ireland to support their teams. The crowd spilled out of the bleachers and onto the nearby hill next to the field.[8]

Although a team out from Ireland creates a challenge to the authenticity of Gaelic games in New York, the clout of an Irish team is also tested by their New York opponents. The New York Gaelic football, hurling, camogie, and women's Gaelic football teams are all selected—as is the case in an Irish county team—from the constituency's best players. Since the NYGAA joined the All-Ireland Championship in 1999 (along with London), the potential exists for a

New York team to play an All-Ireland. Such a possibility challenges the authority of teams based in Ireland as the most authentic and best examples, leaving the status of Gaelic games as uniquely Irish—meaning of Ireland—in question. If New York or London can beat all their opponents and end up in Croke Park playing the All-Ireland, how can Gaelic football be the national game, one distinguished and/or even criticized (see Cronin 1999:113) for its non-international scope? Despite the possibilities, New York has yet to win a game against an Irish team or even pose a significant threat as "County New York."

Photo:
Sign at Rockland Field, about twenty miles northwest of Gaelic Park. The field serves many teams when Gaelic Park is not available. Courtesy of Sara Brady.

Summer players, as described above, are also a privileged group. Delegates of the New York GAA help these young adults arrange for jobs and sometimes offer compensation for playing. The short-term immigrants often overlap with the summer crowd. They often know they are coming for a year or so, and therefore are not affected by the stress and worry of not being able to travel to Ireland and back. Their travels are an adventure or coming of age; many travel after finishing their leaving certs or university. They come to live with friends, work to get money for basics, and travel more. New York is often one of many stops, from other U.S. destinations, to Australia, to round-the-world adventures. During their stay in New York they will play casually with a team for one or two seasons.

The indefinite immigrants are much less carefree. They are in the United States with intentions to stay and make money, but since many do not have green cards they cannot easily go back and forth to and from Ireland. Many of the best players in the New York GAA are in this group. My interviews with Noel and Sean (9/26/03) and Gareth and David (5/23/04) confirmed that only a few members of New York football and hurling teams are in this country legally. This detail means that even if New York defeats an Irish team that travels here to play the first round of the All-Ireland championship in Gaelic Park, the New York team could not travel to Ireland for the second round because only a handful of the team can leave and return without hassle. And the hassle is significant. As Debbie McGoldrick reported in a November 2003 issue of her "Green Card" column in the *Irish Voice:*

> *"This column isn't meant to scare, but just to let readers know what can happen when an illegal alien leaves the country and tries to come back."*
>
> —McGoldrick 2003:18

She tells the story of a close family friend who, after 15 months in the States, had to return to Ireland because a relative fell ill. When he attempted to re-enter the United States, he was caught,deported, and told not to come back for a long time. In the Irish community these stories circulate regularly.

Many of the immigrants in this indefinite group are good enough to make the New York selection. Their presence within the NYGAA is significant and related to their status. Those who finish university and come to the United States with work visas and pre-arranged white-collar employment rarely get involved in the NYGAA or even frequent Gaelic Park, but they benefit from legitimacy in American society. Their peers without access to work visas or green cards forego such clout and come for their own reasons—for example, freedom from a "restrictive life style" is a common one.[9] The

life around the Irish community in New York and Gaelic Park is one conducive to their reliance on established immigrants. It makes sense that they stay close to Ireland through playing Gaelic games; their proximity to the culture they left, and their liminal status—not legitimate but not ready to leave— makes for a difficult lifestyle. However, jogging onto the pitch at Gaelic Park in their county's jersey transforms them from non-entities (in the eyes of formal society) into valued and legitimate community members.

When I ask interviewees: "Can you describe what it is like to play at Gaelic Park?" or "Why do you play Gaelic games?" I often hear something about the jersey worn on the field. To players in this indefinite group in particular the act of putting on a jersey is a special experience, one that changes the player much as a costume can help an actor get into character or a uniform can prepare a soldier. Some interviewees have told me that once the jersey is on, the player becomes someone completely different (Joe 8/15/03):

> *"You get ready, once that jersey is on. You are different, aggressive, ready to fight. Without it you'd never go for a guy. You are proud to wear that jersey because you represent your county."*

Michael distinguished the jersey and the GAA from other sports:

> *"The GAA is unique. It is part of Irish identity. Putting on a county jersey or, at home, the village jersey, doesn't mean the same thing as it does in American sports."*

He emphasized his point with an anecdote. Once, when he was playing for a New York county team, he got mad at his coach. He took off his jersey and threw it at the coach. Later, he was accused of stepping on the jersey. "It's like a flag," he explained. "You are connected to everyone else who played that jersey, in Ireland, in that county, and here" (5/21/03).

For indefinites especially, that connection is needed when the rest of their lives are constantly in-between. They are often the best players, because they are usually young, fit, and skilled (and therefore have little to lose by living in the States without the ability to visit home often). Traditionally, they are men and achieve more material gains from playing at Gaelic Park than women do. Indefinite men often score more than older, more established (and therefore slightly less authentic) players or even their Irish American teammates who, especially in hurling, rarely show more skill than Irish-born athletes.

Some indefinites become permanent immigrants through marriage. Others who immigrated prior to 1996 won green cards through the Donnelly (1988–1990) and Morrison (1992–1994) visa programs run by the federal government. Other permanents were born in the United States to Irish parents who returned to Ireland only to see their kids travel back to America once they were of age. Still others came to the States for college or graduate school and stayed on student visas until proper work visas and eventually green cards followed. A smaller group would be Irish who secured work visas or green cards through sponsored employment in the States. Many of the permanents make up the foundations of New York teams. They play, manage, or administer the clubs even if the more talented players might be younger, less permanent fixtures within the clubs.

Those permanents committed to the GAA will grow old (or already have) at Gaelic Park. They might become delegates for their team or they might referee, or both. John, who played in the park in the 1980s and is now a New York selector is one example (10/30/04). Many become the real movers and shakers within the New York GAA. Some are even stars. Gareth (5/23/04), now dividing his retirement between Ireland and New York, recently received a special honor for his career in Ireland and New York. Michael has learned from writing sports columns for a New York Irish newspaper that at Gaelic Park you can look around and not even realize that "The guy sitting at a bar in the Bronx won the All-Ireland in the 1930s" (5/21/03).

Other permanents, many interviewees told me, move to the suburbs (Patrick 4/9/03; Timothy 9/11/03; Andy 8/4/03). The suburbans come back to the park to "get some

Irishness," to get the reassurance described above. They bring their kids to show where they used to spend their time and to teach them about their culture. They are easily spotted. I described one such family in my field notes one day (10/3/03) because they stood out:

> *"I see a family that entered when I did. They are with their kids. The guy in tweed blazer (not a common sight here) all smiles and Irish accent. A Clare jersey on the daughter. The guy looks like a professor. Their teenage son has on a lacrosse sweatshirt from a N.J. suburban high school. They're not from Woodlawn."*

The man fit the description of the established immigrant who has left the old neighborhood and settled in the suburbs with a family. As Patrick explained, they come to the park to be reassured of home, to talk to others like them, and to watch a familiar game (4/9/03).

Andy considers himself an example of someone who still comes to the park even though most of those who used to go with him no longer bother. "I've closed the place on numerous occasions, not as frequently as I used to. I suppose it's two things operating: one, I don't know as many people as I used to up there anymore and, two, the people that I used to know aren't going there anymore" (8/4/03). But he is still quite active in the administration and like others he works with, returns to the park on a regular basis. This group of immigrants keeps the New York GAA going and at least for now keeps Gaelic Park going.

Their older counterparts, immigrants from the 1950s generation, either help Andy's generation of 1980s immigrants run the clubs or who simply come every week. The old ones, as some call them, regularly line the back row of the bleachers as well as a section in the middle. They chat and watch the games all day, no matter who is playing. These men exemplify the generation who used to frequent the park when they first arrived. They played there, met their spouses there, may have gotten married there, and certainly have an enormous amount of memories which some have shared with me informally at GAA meetings as well as formally in interviews. The Sundays they describe began with church at 11 o'clock, after which they headed to the park for the day. Edward McGuire remembered in a short article for *Irish America* magazine:

> *"Sundays during the spring and summer months were a big day in the McGuire household. Mass in the morning was followed by a hearty breakfast and then off to Gaelic Park where Dad would either by playing or checking out the rival teams."*
>
> —McGuire 2004:126

Those who weren't playing would pay their day's admission, and head to the bar and sit for hours talking, gossiping, watching the games, betting on others, and drinking maybe tea at first and beers later. What they drank has actually come up numerous times in conversation, as I've been reminded that in those days there wasn't a lot of drinking. There were also fewer fights (Paul 5/7/03). Both memories suggest desired images rather than accurate descriptions. Drinking must have been prominent because there used to be more than one bar in the park. Fighting likely occurred in the park's early years. Paddy Grimes recalls that when a fight broke out at the field gate in the 1930s the bartender, "Jim Cronin…raced out from behind the bar, sped through the spectators…and swept up my sister…[who] must have been all of five at the time" (1989:6). By late afternoon, after a day of Gaelic games, you could buy a hot meal in the dining room. One interviewee reported "As the last game was being played, at around 5 p.m., you could go into the dance-hall area and get a full-size old-fashioned Irish meal of meat, potatoes and vegetables, which was never short in quantity and always superb in quality" (McGuire 2004:126). The rest of the night was filled, he said, with music and dancing:

> *"An Irish band would start up a little later and would go on until late in the evening."*

What used to be available at the park and what is available now has changed in many ways. You can no longer sit down to a roast beef dinner, but you can get a burger on a paper plate. You can't waltz to the big bands but you can see some dancing break out in front of the live rock

and Irish bands who perform near the bar area. To the older generation, the place must appear to be beyond recognition. But is it? Descriptions of peaceful tea-drinking Sundays indicate a need to remember a desired if inaccurate past. People still return week after week even though the place is so very different from their memories. If things are so changed, then what do they get from returning?

Seasoned immigrants come back to watch games, but their memories may involve lots of other life-altering moments such as weddings, christenings, or wakes. In the park's heyday as a social mecca, Gaelic Park first provided a place to find one's sea legs. With regular visits to the park, people like Maura, who arrived in New York in 1958, could mingle. Her uncle and aunt picked her up from the airport and the next Sunday they brought her to Gaelic Park where, they told her, she would "meet people" (9/26/03). On one Sunday visit she met her husband. The two later held their wedding reception at Gaelic Park. There was a time, I was told, when "the only reason you wouldn't get married at Gaelic Park is because you wouldn't have booked the day in time" (Noel 9/26/03).

After one GAA meeting on a Thursday night in the fall of 2003, I met a man over the tea and cookies regularly available before and after the meeting. He asked about my project and, seemingly thinking of a great suggestion for me, he put his hand on my shoulder and pointed to another man across the room. "You see him?" He said. "He's one of the oldest delegates we have. He comes every Thursday to the meetings. He knows a lot about the park. He met his wife here; he even got married here. That was the last time his wife was ever at Gaelic Park" (GAA meeting notes, 10/8/03). Taken with a grain of salt, the comment reflects the greater social resource Gaelic Park serves older Irish men. The NYGAA maintains a discounted fee for senior citizens that GAA administrators cite as an important concession. However, a wide range of Irish community members, including equal numbers of men and women of all ages, attend on important match days. The contribution that women have made to the NYGAA is evidenced not only by the efforts of the female nurse and physical therapist ever-present at the park, but also by the recent decision of the administration to name a couple, John and Mary Cox, as the 2004 guests of honor for their annual dinner dance.

Irish Americans

What about the children of these immigrants who met and married at Gaelic Park? Those born in the 1960s remember the park playing an integral role in their childhoods. They went to church on Sunday with their families and then spent the day at Gaelic Park, watching games that many of the other kids they knew at school had never heard of. Often they actually lived near the park, in the Irish enclaves of the Bronx and Inwood.

Just as playing the Gaelic games can make Irish immigrants feel proud and remind them of home, playing the games—especially at Gaelic Park—for an American of Irish descent means becoming Irish. Tony explained his experience in detail:

> *"I think there is something about the sport and the fact that this place allows that to continue.... Just the fact that you are participating in this lineage bridges so much stuff, and the actual act of hurling, the actual act of playing football, you're doing something that's been repeated for generations and generations....One summer that's what I did, an experiment, when I went to train with the New York team [for] the first time. I was an American, I had no idea I was going to make the team, but I worked out all winter in the gym, and I went in....[I was] twenty-six or twenty-seven...so I got in really good shape, and I got really fit.... But the whole summer I went down there, I just went down and asked them if I could play.... [There were] like thirty guys, all from Ireland.... I would literally in my mind remind myself that what I was doing was not just playing...but that I was actually participating in an ancient game, and tried to keep that my focus...and that was fun, it worked."*
>
> —6/10/03

I would... remind myself that what I was doing was not just playing... but that I was actually participating in an ancient game, and tried to keep that my focus....

Tony speaks of a kind of legitimacy that someone of his background might seek at Gaelic Park, and one that can only be achieved through performance. To play Gaelic football, one needs some athletic skill. The game is similar to others like soccer, rugby, and American football. But hurling, as he explains, is so dangerous and different from most other sports that it can rarely be picked up by Americans. What Tony sought out on the field was the embodiment of something cultural, something related to identity, and something that can usually only be mastered by Irish-born athletes. His efforts paid off, and he is one of the few Irish Americans to play for the New York hurling team. By learning and practicing this special sport he resisted losing himself in white America. Through the ritual of sport he maintained an identity distinguishable from "white," "American," and even "Irish American."

In contrast to Irish Americans whose families left Ireland before the revival of Gaelic games, Americans born to Irish parents in the 1960s and 1970s grew up with a sense of what the GAA and Ireland was all about. They experienced Irishness at Gaelic Park, and they could compare it to what they saw on their visits to Ireland. Like the 1980s generation of Irish immigrants, they were commuters of a sort due to technological advances in travel and communication, people who were able to see and experience Ireland as it began its rapid modernization. Unlike earlier generations, they learned how to play the Irish national games in Ireland, and they could bring that experience back and perform for the Irish New York community at Gaelic Park.

At the park and elsewhere they learned how to play music on tin whistles and accordions, fiddles, and flutes. Many young women took step dancing lessons and competed to bring all this embodied culture back to Ireland, where they could impress their parents' hometowns. On a website for *Coyle's School of Irish Dance* in Philadelphia one of the founders describes this generation and its performers:

> *"The Original Coyle Feis Mom: Curled hair, polished dancing shoes, embroidered dresses, practiced steps, and butterflied nerves….these are the essentials for a feis…. I know this first hand since I have been a "Feis Mom" for the past thirty years. …I thought the competition was a wonderful way for the girls to show their talents in Irish dancing. We quickly found ourselves traveling the feis circuit from Gaelic Park in the Bronx, NY, to Glen Echo State Park in VA."*
>
> —Coyle 2003:n.p.

Performances like Irish dance in spaces like Gaelic Park gave this generation of children of immigrants an opportunity to be more than just American. With certification from *An Cuimision le Rince Gaelica,* the Coyles were qualified to teach second- and third-generation Irish Americans about their culture through performance. With these experiences, this generation became more than just white. They were ethnic and their acquired skills, unique to their ascribed culture, created a concrete (or at least marketable) identity. As exemplified by the careers of *Riverdance* stars Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, Americans were doing it even better than the Irish by the mid-1990s.

For second and third generation Irish Americans, music and dance are the few genres in which someone without a direct tie to Ireland can still consume Irish identity. Irish sport has never been able to build up a strong base in the U.S. (despite the creation of minor boards for young people) as successfully as Irish dance has. Dance and music could be performed individually, and sports such as hurling require specialized skill and practice from a very young age. However, for this specific group of second- or third-generation Irish Americans, the 1980s wave of immigrants created something living to observe and/or get involved with that differed and became more valued than empty relics of heritage like wearing green on St. Patrick's Day or hanging an Irish landscape in the living room. As Irish sociologist Mary Corcoran noted:

> *"The belated realization among Irish Americans that a new generation of Irish immigrants were clandestinely living and working in the United States activated*

their sense of ethnic identity. Here was a generation of Irish immigrants bringing life back into dilapidated Irish neighborhoods, playing their hearts out in Gaelic Park, and providing a new market for ethnic goods and services. For a significant number of Irish Americans, the reactivation of their ethnic identity served as a catalyst for ethnic solidarity expressed through their involvement in the movement for immigration reform."

—Corcoran 1993:159

During this era, there was the opportunity—even if one couldn't or wasn't willing to learn how to actually play the games—to watch Irish performance. The Irish Immigration Reform Movement (IIRM) also provided an avenue for Irish Americans to rally for their ethnicity. In the view of many Irish Americans, the Irish, after all, built America, a statement made even more ironic than it already is by the fact that the Irish who came in the 1980s were illegal because they had no direct familial ties to the U.S., just as some white Irish Americans longing to become Irish had no direct ties to Ireland. The cachet of being Irish that immigrants held in the eyes of Irish Americans clashed with the separate identity that GAA players asserted on the field. But, as shown in the 1980s lobby effort, the Irish were quick to call on their legacy in America and associate themselves with suburban Irish Americans—especially whan compared to other nationals vying for green cards.

Conclusion: That auld feeling

Gaelic Park has served myriad purposes to Irish coming to New York at different times for different reasons, from being a safety net for the recently arrived immigrant to an ethnic playground where one can lose an assimilated self and get some Irishness. For many Irish immigrants, Gaelic Park is a luxury to be enjoyed. For others, like the indefinites, the park's resources exceed leisure and become a space in which legitimacy and status can be achieved.

On one of those Sundays, when an Irish team was flying out to play New York, I arranged to drive an interviewee to the park. As we chatted on the way, I asked: "So why do you go to Gaelic Park?" Without flinching, he explained to me: "To get that auld feelin' again." The desire for the feeling is strong. The lengths that the NYGAA will go to in an effort to keep the organization and tradition of sport going are astonishing. It costs the NYGAA $75,000 a year to lease the space and more than that to participate in the All-Ireland Championship. I wondered why the organization would invest so much considering the basically nonexistent chance the teams have to proceed past the first round of games. But the response I received was unanimous: the amount of support shown for Gaelic games in New York on the championship or even All-Star match days justifies the money and toil. Gaelic Park culture generates an Irishness on such days that other places cannot emulate.

The culture has of late shown signs of fading as more and more Irish choose to return home. Despite dwindling numbers the NYGAA continues to develop plans to move its headquarters to Randall's Island. In February 2002, at the annual New York GAA banquet, plans were unveiled for a twenty-plus acre site on Randall's Island that the association could potentially call home in just a few years. The opportunity, it seems, resulted from New York City's desire to improve Randall's Island and from movement by the parks commission to boost athletic spaces, especially ones for ethnic sports. By moving to Randall's Island, Irish sport will no longer be so unique as to have its own mecca and would be part of a bigger city-wide sports community. Down would go the walls of Gaelic Park. The question is whether the auld feeling will go along with it, and whether that would be a good or bad thing.

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Notes

1 New York Governor George Pataki described the park as "a special place, not just for sporting events but as a haven for community and culture" (in *Flynn* 2000:3); Bill Twomey writes, "Gaelic Park, a long-time magnet to Irish immigrants" (1997:n.p.). "Mecca" was the most common word I have found used to characterize the park in interviews and written texts, such as the memoirs of former *Irish Echo* publisher Paddy Grimes: "Gaelic Park, the mecca for Irish sports in this country, came into existence in 1928" (1989:2).

2 Acknowledgment of these performances has remained limited to popular forums such as weekly New York Irish newspapers, from the *Irish World* (founded 1870), which eventually absorbed the *Gaelic American,* to the *Irish Echo,* the *Irish Voice,* the *Irish Emigrant,* and, most recently, *Home and Away.* There has yet to be a thorough, scholarly analysis of these activities. Studies on Irish immigration to the U.S. and specifically New York have, of course, been extensive. See, for example, Miller (1985) and Kenny (2000). Works range from *The New York Irish* collection edited by Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (1996) (especially Marion Casey's article "From the East Side to the Seaside: Irish Americans on the Move in New York City") to Linda Almeida's *Irish Immigrants in New York City 1945–1995* (2001). Almeida covers both the 1950s and 1980s immigration waves; see her articles focused on the 1980s for specific attention to the "illegal" generation (1989 and 1992). For a sociological study of the population see Mary P. Corcoran's *Irish Illegals* (1993). *Irish Echo* editor Ray O'Hanlon's chronicle, *The New Irish Americans,* also describes this group and narrates the effort to attain residency in the U.S. (1998). Also, the journal, *New York Irish History* (1986–2004), has contributed to the study of the Irish in the city. For study on cultural performance, see Casey (1992), and for a bibliography of works on the Irish in New York see Shea and Casey (1995). However, these accounts mention sport only tangentially.

Alternatively, much documentation exists on the ever-popular Gaelic Athletic Association. "Few movements in modern Ireland," writes Marcus de Búrca in *The GAA: A History,* "have taken root so rapidly and so firmly as the GAA" (2000:15). Considering that the first thing members of the 2003 Irish Everest expedition did when they reached the highest summit in the

world was to bring out "a hurley and sliothar and hit a *puc fada*" (Carey 2003:4), it is clear that the athletic project of the Gaelic movement still strongly influences the Irish national ideal. (The astonishing popularity of the GAA is exemplified by its huge membership base of 750,000 (Doak 1998:25) and 2,500 clubs throughout Ireland. The popularity of the country's national games shows little sign of losing the country's interest. Attendance at All-Ireland finals regularly sell out the nearly 80,000 seats at Croke Park—the fourth largest stadium in Europe. Even Sony agrees: Gaelic Football is available for Play Station 2.) But most works on the GAA are factual or popular, lacking academic rigor. The major histories of the GAA further fail to employ critical perspectives (see De Búrca [(1980) 2000] and Mandle [1987]).

Work on Gaelic games played outside of Ireland has steadily emerged, such as Joseph M. Bradley's study of Irish immigrants in Scotland (1998) and Anthony Hughes's work on Irish sport in Australia (1997). More recently, authors such as Mike Cronin (1999) have begun to think more critically about the GAA and Irish sport in general. See, for example, Katie Liston's *The Gendered Field of Irish Sport* (2002); Richard Doak's *(De)constructing Irishness in the 1990s* (1998); and Alan Bairner's *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization* (2001).

Studies that have incorporated fieldwork, as the present one does, include Michael Black's dissertation *Cultural Identity: Sport, Gender, Nationalism and the Irish Diaspora* (1997) and Nick McCarthy's *Irish Rules* (2003). This article attempts to bridge the study of migration and sport in the context of the New York Irish community and its varied immigrant groups with an analysis of live performances of sport and spectatorship.

3 This feature of the park stands out to visitors, as exhibited by a group of Down hurlers who traveled to play New York on May 23, 2004. When I asked them what they thought of Gaelic Park, they agreed that it was "brilliant" and "different"; they were surprised to see both teams congregate in the same bar after the game.

4 The GAA, as a project of nationalism, used the infamous ban on foreign games (lifted in 1971) to insure that Irish sport remained Irish: "'persons who play rugby, soccer, hockey, cricket or any imported games shall be suspended for two years from date of playing such games'" (in Cronin 1999:84). Mike Cronin describes the sports peculiarity: "Gaelic games are…fascinating in the context of nationalism and national identity as they are only played at the domestic level. In this the GAA is self-defining. While Gaelic games are played by the world-wide Irish diaspora…they are ultimately a parochial sport in a globalized world (1999:20).

5 As of March 30, 2003, smoking has been banned throughout public places in New York City.

6 All interviewee names are pseudonyms used to protect the identities of those who agreed to participate in my research.

7 My phrasing here is inspired by a description from a participant in Fiona Buckland's fieldwork on queer world-making in New York City clubs: Stephen (also a pseudonym) told Buckland that through dancing at clubs "I get my gayness" (2002:37).

8 These numbers, although impressive by current standards, pale in comparison to past attendance.

9 See Linda Almeida's analysis of her survey of the New Irish: "For many New Irish the decision to migrate was motivated by a desire to escape what they felt was a restrictive and suffocating culture and lifestyle in Ireland." Her survey of the 1980s generation found that "25.5 percent of the respondents cited a 'restrictive life style, culture' as a reason for leaving Ireland'" (Almeida 2001:80, citing her article "And They Still Haven't Found What They're Looking For" [1992:211], Survey Results, question #1.